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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 PARAMARIBO 000101

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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DEPT FOR WHA/ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS A. SHANNON
DEPART FOR WHA/CAR VMDEPIRRO AND JROSHOLT
SOUTHCOM FOR COMMANDER ADMIRAL JAMES G. STAVRIDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NS](#)

SUBJECT: (SBU) SCENESETTER AND READ-AHEAD FOR THE VISIT OF
ASSISTANT SECRETARY THOMAS A. SHANNON AND ADMIRAL JAMES G.
STAVRIDIS TO PARAMARIBO, SURINAME FRIDAY, MARCH 28, 2008.

REF: 08 PARAMARIBO 95

11. (SBU) THE FOLLOWING SCENESETTER IS A
SENSITIVE-BUT-UNCLASSIFIED VERSION OF REFTEL.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY OF PROPOSED TRIP AGENDA: Everyone at
Embassy Paramaribo joins me in welcoming you to Suriname.
Although we cannot yet confirm your appointment with
President Venetiaan, who is out of the country, our tentative
plan for your three-hour visit would include a short
meet/greet with Embassy staff, a working lunch/Country Team
briefing at the Embassy, and the afore-mentioned meeting with
President Venetiaan (perhaps with other Cabinet Ministers
present; decision is pending with the President).
Time-permitting, we then propose two additional, separate
meetings for Assistant Secretary Shannon: (1) Foreign
Minister Kraag-Keteldijk and, (2) Religious Leaders of the
Inter-Faith Council (proposed venue: the Central Mosque).
For Admiral Stavridis, we propose meetings with (1) Defense
Minister Ivan Fernald and, (2) Commander of the Armed Forces
Col. Ernst Mercuur. If any of the previously-noted Ministers
is not available to meet, we would pursue meetings with other
Ministers of interest to both Assistant Secretary Shannon and
Admiral Stavridis, specifically, Health Minister Waterberg
(USNS Comfort, MEDRETES, Beyond the Horizon, medical
diplomacy) and Justice and Police Minister Santokhi (counter
narcotics, money laundering, terrorism, trafficking in
persons, regional security). We expect media to be present
for at least a portion of your visit, and will seek to invite
them for any mosque visit. Although we have discussed the
above proposed agenda with the Foreign Ministry, further
arrangements remain pending the President's decision. We
will provide briefing materials for all confirmed
appointments via septel. END SUMMARY OF PROPOSED TRIP
AGENDA; FOLLOWING TEXT PROVIDES SCENESETTER INFORMATION.

Suriname Overview and International Relations

13. (SBU) Suriname, formerly know as Dutch Guiana and
independent from the Netherlands since 1975, lies on the
northeastern coast of South America. It is approximately the
size of Georgia, has a population of less than half a
million, and has traditionally been the Dutch-speaking
"misfit" of the Western Hemisphere. A member of the UN, OAS,
CARICOM, NAM, and the Islamic Conference, Suriname's
political traditions, culture, history, and immigration tries
are neither Spanish/Portuguese (like most of South and
Central America), nor British/French (like most of the
Caribbean). Although migration trends, economic assistance,

and remittances still keep Surinamers looking to the Netherlands (home to an estimated 300,000 Dutch/Surinamese), historic resentments and ethnic and cultural differences also mean that Suriname does not align easily with Europe. Consequently, it seeks to expand its ties with China, India, and Indonesia as part of a foreign policy initiative to reduce dependency on the Dutch.

14. (SBU) In the region, Suriname has received sustained, well-publicized medical assistance from Cuba, in part funded by Venezuela. This very successful program seems to be helping Cuba and Venezuela gain popular support among ordinary Surinamers. Surinamers enjoy good relations with Brazil and France (French Guiana), although a territorial border dispute remains with French Guiana. More serious border disputes complicate Suriname's relationship with Guyana, and remain an emotional issue for many Surinamers. Given the tensions surrounding the borders, in March 2007 Post worked with the State Department Office of the Geographer to ensure that all official United States Government (USG) maps of Suriname (which invariably depict the borders to favor Guyana and French Guiana) include the following standard policy disclaimer: "Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative." In part due to the border dispute, an anti-Guyana bias permeates Surinamese society.

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U.S. -Suriname Bilateral Relations
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15. (SBU) Except in the 1980's when then-military dictator Desi Bouterse's friendly relationship with Daniel Ortega and Fidel Castro kept Suriname on the map of U.S. foreign policy

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priorities, in recent years the country has received scant attention from U.S. policy makers. Nor does Suriname receive appreciable development assistance from the United States.

16. (SBU) For its part, the Government of Suriname (GOS) often demonstrates a lack of affinity for USG foreign policy priorities. For example, Suriname supports the one-China policy. It refused to issue any form of pro-democracy statement after Raul Castro assumed power in February, instead sending a congratulatory note to the new leader. Nor does the GOS support the USG position on Kosovo, despite the Embassy's best efforts. Although the U.S. Embassy appears to enjoy some level of popular support among the people of Suriname, official USG-GOS relations are "cordial and correct," but they are not "warm." There are, however, two exceptions to this generalization: our defense relationship with the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the Suriname Defense Forces (SDF), and with the law enforcement community of the Ministry of Justice and Police. Not coincidentally, these are the only two Ministries that in the past could regularly count on USG development assistance (modest amounts of IMET, FMF, and INCLE). The Embassy also has a strong relationship with the cultural community and Suriname's lone University.

17. (SBU) Through our Embassy in Paramaribo, the USG's short-term goals in Suriname remain four-fold: strengthening the police and judiciary, helping professionalize journalists and the military, investing in people (including the fight against HIV/AIDS) and the environment, and encouraging measures to facilitate economic growth investment. However, our longer-term strategic goal is to transform our bilateral relationship into an overall positive partnership whereby the United States can count on Suriname as a friendly partner (on a case-by-case basis) in international forums such as the UN and OAS, and Suriname can count on the United States to recognize that this tiny country can be relevant to U.S. strategic interests in both the Caribbean region and the South American continent.

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Military Coups, Desi Bouterse, and the
December Murders of 1982

¶8. (SBU) Independent in 1975, Suriname suffered military coups in 1980 and 1990; civilian rule was re-established in ¶1992. Under the control of Desi Bouterse, who led the first military coup, the military government executed 15 prominent citizens in 1982 for their opposition to the regime. In early 2005 the Government of Suriname notified Bouterse, who remains active in politics and is a sitting member of Parliament, of its intent to prosecute him and 23 other suspects for the murders. Begun amidst high societal tension in November 2007, the slow, legalistic pace of the trial, inter alia, has thus far diffused societal fears that the trial would be disruptive. There have been four one-day sessions in four months, all procedural. Bouterse stayed away, and vows to continue to do so. If, however, a guilty verdict appears possible (perhaps late in 2008 or in 2009), tensions likely will rise.

Civilian Military Relations

¶9. (U) Since military rule ended in Suriname, there has been a strained relationship between the civilian government and the armed forces. In 1992, during President Venetiaan's first of three terms, the civilian authority took bold steps to strip the military of its overreaching constitutional powers, despite strong protest from the military. Venetiaan and several of his close associates had been detained by the military during the military regime. During Venetiaan's last term, his Minister of Defense was disliked by many in the armed forces who perceived him as unresponsive to their needs. Since being installed three years ago the current Minister, Ivan Fernald, has been more engaged with members of the armed forces. However, to date he has failed to bring much-needed resources and training, nor any noticeable change in civilian-military relations.

Criminal Activity Pervasive, Just Below the Surface

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¶10. (SBU) Although Suriname is not an openly violent society, the rule of law is nevertheless under threat. Suriname is a major transshipment point for South American cocaine en route to Europe and, to a lesser degree, to the United States. The government's inability to control its borders and the lack of law enforcement presence in the largely unmonitored interior allow traffickers to move drug shipments via sea, river, and air with little if any resistance. Suriname lacks the resources to properly equip the marine and air wings of its national military, which are responsible for protecting its borders--a mission which may be transferred to a yet-to-be established Coast Guard.

Note: There is some skepticism amongst USG experts of the GOS's ability to stand up a Coast Guard. The Embassy recently (March 2008) shared with the MOD the May 2006 US Southern Command- prepared assessment of the feasibility of establishing a Suriname Coast Guard. Delay in providing this assessment to the GOS was due in part to uncertainty whether there was authorization to share such a frank assessment with the host government. The report identified a series of problems in standing up a Surinamese Coast Guard, including: inadequate resources and legislation, complicated bureaucratic requirements, drug-related corruption, relative geographic isolation, and weak judicial institutions. End note.

Economy Stable, but not Sustainable

¶11. (SBU) The United States remains Suriname's largest trading partner. Largely thanks to high commodity prices, the Surinamese economy has stabilized over the last six years after the deep economic decline and high inflation of the late 1990's. However, the GOS has not implemented the reforms necessary to liberalize its economy and realize its full economic potential, particularly should commodity prices fall. Income from the bauxite sector, dominated by SURALCO, a subsidiary of U.S. based ALCOA, accounts for more than 30% of GDP and about 60-70% of export earnings. Higher world prices for gold have led to the increased value of Suriname's second-most mined mineral. Lumber, fishing, and agriculture are other major industries. Three international oil companies, Occidental, Repsol YPF, and Noble Energy, have formed a joint venture with the state oil company, Staatsolie, to prospect offshore.

Internal Politics

¶12. (U) With an area previously noted as roughly equal to the state of Georgia and a population of only 492,000, Suriname is one of the least densely populated countries in the world. It is an ethnically diverse land with people of East Indian, African, Indonesian, Chinese, and European descent whose constant wrangling for pieces of the pie color Suriname's economic and political atmosphere. On May 25, 2005, Suriname held its fourth successive free and fair election since the restoration of democracy. President Ronald Venetiaan's ruling New Front coalition, which consisted of three ethnically-based parties and one labor union party, lost its simple majority in the National Assembly but still fell short of an effective governing majority. To form a working majority, the New Front joined with a Maroon-based coalition (Maroon is the term to describe the descendants of escaped slaves) which had parliamentary seats for the first time, and with a one-seat progressive party. Slowed by a bias for strong consensus and typified by a spoils-system favored by the entrenched ethnic parties, the government's "don't upset the apple cart" politics have not been a public relations success. The often cynical Surinamese public gives the government extraordinarily low marks (one March poll indicated 90% of Surinamers don't want President Venetiaan back in 2010). However, the government seems to have convinced the public that the turmoil an early transition of power to the opposition might cause would be worse than the current perceived stagnation. Rare street actions attract few participants. Presidential elections are next scheduled for 2010.

Visit of Assistant Secretary Shannon and Admiral Stavridis will demonstrate USG commitment to Suriname, and to the region

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¶13. (SBU) We expect that your visit, albeit only hours-long, will demonstrate to President Venetiaan and to his Cabinet, the National Assembly, the Surinamese Military, and civil society that the United States has a strong commitment to this country, and to the region. Your presence will provide an effective counterpoint to the high-level attention that Suriname already receives from China, Venezuela (President Chavez visited in 2000), and the ongoing success of Cuba's "health diplomacy" initiatives in Suriname. We welcome your visit.
SCHREIBER HUGHES